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JOHN BROWN'S EXPEDITION

REVIEWED IN

A LETTER

FROM

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REV. THEODORE PARKER,

AT ROME,

TO

FRANCIS JACKSON,

BOSTON.

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LETTER.

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ROME, Nov. 24, 1859.

MY DEAR FRIEND, — I see by a recent telegraph which the Steamer of Nov. 2d, brought from Boston, that the Court found Capt. Brown guilty, and passed sentence upon him. It is said, Friday, Dec. 2d, is fixed as the day for hanging him. So, long before this reaches you, my friend will have passed on to the reward of his magnanimous public services, and his pure, upright private life. I am not well enough to be the minister to any congregation, least of all to one like that which, for so many years, helped my soul while it listened to my words. Surely, the 28th Congregational Society in Boston needs a minister, not half dead, but alive all over; and yet, while reading the accounts of the affair at Harper's Ferry, and of the sayings of certain men at Boston, whom you and I know only too well, I could not help wishing I was at home again *to use what poor remnant of power is left to me in defence of the True and the Right.*

America is rich in able men, in skilful writers, in ready and accomplished speakers. But few men dare treat public affairs with reference to the great principles of justice, and the American Democracy; nay, few with reference to any remote future, or even with a comprehensive survey of the present. Our public writers ask what effect will this opinion have on the Democratic party, or the

Republican party; how will it affect the next Presidential election; what will the great State of Pennsylvania or Ohio, or New York say to it? This is very unfortunate for us all, especially when the people have to deal practically, and that speedily with a question concerning the very existence of Democratic institutions in America; for it is not to be denied that we must give up DEMOCRACY if we keep SLAVERY, or give up SLAVERY if we keep DEMOCRACY.

I greatly deplore this state of things. Our able men fail to perform their natural function, to give valuable instruction and advice to the people; and at the same time they debase and degrade themselves. The hurrahs and the offices they get are poor compensation for falseness to their own consciences.

In my best estate, I do not pretend to much political wisdom, and still less now while sick; but I wish yet to set down a few thoughts for your private eye, and, it may be, for the ear of the Fraternity. They are, at least, the result of long meditation on the subject; besides, they are not at all new nor peculiar to me, but are a part of the Public Knowledge of all enlightened men.

1. A MAN HELD AGAINST HIS WILL AS A SLAVE HAS A NATURAL RIGHT TO KILL EVERY ONE WHO SEEKS TO PREVENT HIS ENJOYMENT OF LIBERTY. This has long been recognized as a self-evident proposition, coming so directly from the Primitive Instincts of Human Nature, that it neither required proofs nor admitted them.

2. IT MAY BE A NATURAL DUTY OF THE SLAVE TO DEVELOP THIS NATURAL RIGHT IN A PRACTICAL MANNER, AND ACTUALLY KILL ALL THOSE WHO SEEK TO PREVENT HIS ENJOYMENT OF LIBERTY. For if he continue patiently in bondage: First, he entails the foulest of curses on his children; and, second, he encourages other

men to commit the crime against nature which he allows his own master to commit. It is my duty to preserve my own body from starvation. If I fail thereof through sloth, I not only die, but incur the contempt and loathing of my acquaintances while I live. It is not less my duty to do all that is in my power to preserve my body and soul from Slavery; and if I submit to that through cowardice, I not only become a bondman, and suffer what thraldom inflicts, but I incur also the contempt and loathing of my acquaintance. Why do freemen scorn and despise a slave? Because they think his condition is a sign of his cowardice, and believe that he ought to prefer death to bondage. The Southerners hold the Africans in great contempt, though mothers of their children. Why? Simply because the Africans are slaves; that is, because the Africans fail to perform the natural duty of securing freedom by killing their oppressors.

3. THE FREEMAN HAS A NATURAL RIGHT TO HELP THE SLAVES RECOVER THEIR LIBERTY, AND IN THAT ENTERPRISE TO DO FOR THEM ALL WHICH THEY HAVE A RIGHT TO DO FOR THEMSELVES.

This statement, I think, requires no argument or illustration.

4. IT MAY BE A NATURAL DUTY FOR THE FREEMAN TO HELP THE SLAVES TO THE ENJOYMENT OF THEIR LIBERTY, AND AS MEANS TO THAT END, TO AID THEM IN KILLING ALL SUCH AS OPPOSE THEIR NATURAL FREEDOM.

If you were attacked by a wolf, I should not only have a *right* to aid you in getting rid of that enemy, but it would be my DUTY to help you in proportion to my power. If it were a MURDERER, and not a wolf, who attacked you, the duty would be still the same. Suppose it is not a murderer who would kill you, but a KIDNAP-

PER who would enslave, does that make it less my duty to help you out of the hands of your enemy? Suppose it is not a kidnapper who would make you a bondman, but a SLAVEHOLDER who would keep you one, does that remove my obligation to help you?

5. THE PERFORMANCE OF THIS DUTY IS TO BE CONTROLLED BY THE FREEMAN'S POWER AND OPPORTUNITY TO HELP THE SLAVES. (The Impossible is never the Obligatory). I cannot help the slaves in Dahomey or Bornou, and am not bound to try. I can help those who escape to my own neighborhood, and I ought to do so. My duty is commensurate with my power; and as my power increases, my duty enlarges along with it. If I *could* help the bondmen in Virginia to their freedom as easily and effectually as I can aid the runaway at my own door, then I OUGHT to do so.

These five maxims have a direct application to America at this day, and the people of the Free States have a certain dim perception thereof, which, fortunately, is becoming clearer every year.

Thus, the people of Massachusetts *feel* that they ought to protect the fugitive slaves who come into our State. Hence come first, the irregular attempts to secure their liberty, and the declarations of noble men, like Timothy Gilbert, George W. Carnes, and others, that they will do so even at great personal risk; and, secondly, the statute laws made by the Legislature to accomplish that end.

Now, if Massachusetts had the power to do as much for the slaves in Virginia as for the runaways in her own territory, we should soon see those two sets of measures at work in *that* direction also.

I find it is said in the Democratic newspapers that "Capt. Brown had many friends at the North, who sympathized with him in general, and in special approved of

this particular scheme of his; they furnished him with some twelve or twenty thousand dollars, it would seem." I think much more than that is true of us. If he *had* succeeded in running off one or two thousand slaves to Canada, even at the expense of a little violence and bloodshed, *the majority of men in New England would have rejoiced, not only in the End, but also in the Means.* The first successful attempt of a considerable number of slaves to secure their freedom by violence will clearly show how deep is the sympathy of the people for them, and how strongly they embrace the five principles I mentioned above. A little success of that sort will serve as *priming* for the popular cannon; it is already *loaded.*

Of course, I was not astonished to hear that an attempt had been made to free the slaves in a certain part of Virginia, nor should I be astonished if another "insurrection" or "rebellion" took place in the State of ———, or a third in ———, or a fourth in ———. Such things are to be expected; for they do not depend merely on the private will of men like Capt. Brown and his associates, but on the great General Causes which move all human kind to hate Wrong and love Right. Such "insurrections" will continue as long as Slavery lasts, and will increase, both in frequency and in power, just as the people become intelligent and moral. Virginia may hang John Brown and all that family, but she cannot hang the HUMAN RACE; and until that is done, noble men will rejoice in the motto of that once magnanimous State — "*Sic semper Tyrannis!*" "Let such be the end of every oppressor."

It is a good Anti-Slavery picture on the Virginia shield: — a man standing on a tyrant and chopping his head off with a sword; only I would paint the sword-holder *black* and the tyrant *white*, to show the *immediate application* of the principle. The American people will have to march

to rather severe music, I think, and it is better for them to face it in season. A few years ago it did not seem difficult first to check Slavery, and then to end it without any bloodshed. I think this cannot be done now, nor ever in the future. All the great charters of HUMANITY have been writ in blood. I once hoped that of American Democracy would be engrossed in less costly ink; but it is plain, now, that our pilgrimage must lead through a Red Sea, wherein many a Pharaoh will go under and perish. Alas! that we are not wise enough to be just, or just enough to be wise, and so gain much at small cost!

Look, now, at a few notorious facts:

I. There are four million slaves in the United States violently withheld from their natural right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Now, they are our fellow countrymen — yours and mine, just as much as any four million *white* men. Of course, you and I owe them the duty which one man owes another of his own nation, — the duty of instruction, advice, and protection of natural rights. If they are starving, we ought to help feed them. The color of their skins, their degraded social condition, their ignorance, abates nothing from their natural Claim on us, or from our natural Duty toward them.

There are men in all the Northern States who feel the obligation which citizenship imposes on them — the duty to help those slaves. Hence arose the ANTI-SLAVERY SOCIETY, which seeks simply to excite the white people to perform their natural duty to their dark fellow-countrymen. Hence comes CAPT. BROWN'S EXPEDITION — an attempt to help his countrymen enjoy their natural right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

He sought by violence what the Anti-Slavery Society works for with other weapons. The two agree in the end, and differ only in the means. Men like Capt. Brown

will be continually rising up among the white people of the Free States, attempting to do their *natural duty* to their black countrymen — that is, help them to freedom. Some of these efforts will be successful. Thus, last winter Capt. Brown himself escorted eleven of his countrymen from bondage in Missouri to freedom in Canada. He did not snap a gun, I think, although then, as more recently, he had his fighting tools at hand, and would have used them, if necessary. Even now, the Underground Railroad is in constant and beneficent operation. By and by, it will be an Overground Railroad from Mason and Dixon's line clear to Canada: the only *tunneling* will be in the Slave States. Northern men applaud the brave conductors of that Locomotive of Liberty.

When Thomas Garrett was introduced to a meeting of political Free-Soilers in Boston, as "the man who had helped 1,800 slaves to their natural liberty," even that meeting gave the righteous Quaker *three times three.* All honest Northern hearts beat with admiration of such men; nay, with love for them. Young lads say, "I wish that heaven would make me such a man." The wish will now and then be father to the fact. You and I have had opportunity enough, in twenty years, to see that this philanthropic patriotism is on the increase at the North, and the special direction it takes is toward the liberation of their countrymen in bondage.

Not many years ago, Boston sent money to help the Greeks in their struggle for *political freedom*, (they never quite lost their *personal liberty*,) but with the money, she sent what was more valuable and far more precious, one of her most valiant and heroic sons, who staid in Greece to fight the great battle of Humanity. Did your friend, Dr. Samuel G. Howe, lose the esteem of New-England

men by that act? He won the admiration of Europe, and holds it still.

Nay, still later, the same dear old Boston — Hunkers have never been more than rats and mice in her house, which she suffers for a time, and then drives out twelve hundred of them at once on a certain day of March, 1776, — that same dear old Boston sent the same Dr. Howe to carry aid and comfort to the Poles, then in deadly struggle for their political existence. Was he disgraced because he lay seven-and-forty days in a Prussian jail in Berlin? Not even in the eyes of the Prussian King, who afterwards sent him a gold medal, whose metal was worth as many dollars as that philanthropist lay days in the despot's jail. It is said, "Charity should begin at home." The American began a good ways off, but has been working homeward ever since. The Dr. Howe of to-day would and ought to be more ready to help an American to *personal liberty*, than a Pole or a Greek to mere political freedom, and would find more men to furnish aid and comfort to our own countrymen, even if they were black. It would not surprise me if there were other and well-planned attempts in other States to do what Captain Brown heroically, if not successfully, tried in Virginia. Nine out of ten may fail — the tenth will succeed. The victory over Gen. Burgoyne more than made up for all the losses in many a previous defeat; it was the beginning of the end. Slavery will not die a dry death, it may have as many lives as a cat; at last, it will die like a mad dog in a village, with only the enemies of the human kind to lament its fate, and they too cowardly to appear as mourners.

II. But it is not merely white men who will fight for the liberty of Americans; the negroes will take their defence into their own hands, especially if they can find

white men to lead them. No doubt, the African race is greatly inferior to the Caucasian in general intellectual power, and also in that instinct for Liberty which is so strong in the Teutonic family, and just now obvious in the Anglo-Saxons of Britain and America; besides, the African race have but little desire for vengeance — the lowest form of the love of justice. Here is one example out of many: In Santa Cruz, the old slave laws were the most horrible, I think, I ever read of in modern times, unless those of the Carolinas be an exception. If a slave excited others to run away, for the first offence his right leg was to be cut off; for the second offence, his other leg. This mutilation was not to be done by a surgeon's hand; the poor wretch was laid down on a log, and his legs chopped off with a plantation axe, and the stumps plunged into boiling pitch to stanch the blood, and so save the *property* from entire destruction; for the live *Torso* of a slave might serve as a warning. No action of a Court was requisite to inflict this punishment; any master could thus mutilate his bondman. Even from 1830 to 1846, it was common for owners to beat their offending victims with "tamarind rods" six feet long and an inch in thickness at the bigger end — rods thick set with ugly thorns. When that process was over, the lacerated back was washed with a decoction of the Manchineel, a poison tree, which made the wounds fester, and long remain open.

In 1846, the negroes were in "rebellion," and took possession of the island; they were 25,000, the whites 3,000. But the blacks did not hurt the hair of a white man's head; they got their freedom, but they took no Revenge! Suppose 25,000 Americans, held in bondage by 3,000 Algerines on a little island, should get their masters into their hands, how many of the 3,000 would see the next sun go down?

No doubt, it is through the absence of this desire of natural vengeance, that the Africans have been reduced to bondage, and kept in it.

But *there is a limit even to the negro's forbearance.* San Domingo is not a great way off. The revolution which changed its black inhabitants from tame slaves into wild men, took place after you had ceased to call yourself a boy.

It shows what may be in America, with no white man to help. In the Slave States, there is many a possible San Domingo, which may become actual any day; and, if not in 1860, then in some other "year of our Lord." Besides, America offers more than any other country to excite the slave to love of Liberty, and the effort for it. We are always talking about "Liberty," boasting that we are "the freest people in the world," declaring that "a man would die, rather than be a slave." We continually praise our Fathers "who fought the Revolution." We build monuments to commemorate even the humblest beginning of that great national work. Once a year, we stop all ordinary work, and give up a whole day to the noisiest kind of rejoicing for the War of Independence. How we praise the "champions of liberty!" How we point out the "infamy of the British oppressors!" "They would make our Fathers slaves," say we, "and we slew the oppressor — SIC SEMPER TYRANNIS!"

Do you suppose this will fail to produce its effect on the black man, one day? The South must either give up keeping "Independence Day," or else keep it in a little more thorough fashion. Nor is this all: the Southerners are continually taunting the negroes with their miserable nature. "You are only half human," say they, "not capable of freedom." "Hay is good for horses, not for hogs," said the *philosophic* American who now "repre-

sents the great Democracy" at the Court of Turin. *So, liberty is good for white men, not for negroes.* Have they souls? I don't know that — *non mi ricordo.* "Contempt," says the proverb, "will cut through the shell of the tortoise." And, one day, even the sluggish African will wake up under the three-fold stimulus of the Fourth of July cannon, the whip of the slaveholder, and the sting of his heartless mockery. Then, if "oppression maketh wise men mad," what do you think it will do to African slaves, who are familiar with scenes of violence, and all manner of cruelty? Still more: if the negroes have not general power of mind, or instinctive love of liberty, equal to the whites, they are much our superiors in *power of cunning*, and in *contempt for death* — rather formidable qualities in a servile war. There already have been several risings of slaves in this century; they spread fear and consternation. The future will be more terrible. Now, in case of an insurrection, not only is there, as Jefferson said, "no attribute of the Almighty" which can take sides with the master, but *there will be many white men who will take part with the slave.* Men, like the Lafayettes of the last century, and the Dr. Howes of this, may give the insurgent negro as effectual aid as that once rendered to America and Greece; and the public opinion of an enlightened world will rank them among its heroes of noblest mark.

If I remember rightly, some of your fathers were in the battle of Lexington, and that at Bunker Hill. I believe, in the course of the war which followed, every able-bodied man in your town, (Newton,) was in actual service. Now-a-days, their descendants are proud of the fact. One day, it will be thought not less heroic for a negro to fight for his personal liberty, than for a white man to fight for political independence, and against a tax of three pence a

pound on tea. Wait a little, and things will come round.

III. The existence of Slavery endangers all our Democratic institutions. It does this if only tolerated as an exceptional measure — a matter of present convenience, and still more when proclaimed as an instantial principle, a rule of political conduct for all time and every place. Look at this: In 1790, there were (say) 300,000 slaves; soon they make their first doubling, and are 600,000; then their second, 1,200,000; then their third, 2,400,000. They are now in the process of doubling the fourth time, and will soon be 4,800,000; then comes the fifth double, 9,600,000; then the sixth, 19,200,000. Before the year of our Lord nineteen hundred, there will be twenty million slaves!

An Anglo-Saxon with common sense does not like this Africanization of America; he wishes the superior race to multiply rather than the inferior. Besides, it is plain to a one-eyed man that Slavery is an irreconcilable enemy of the progressive development of Democracy; that, if allowed to exist, it must be allowed to spread, to gain political, social and ecclesiastical power; and all that it gains for the slaveholders is just so much taken from the freemen.

Look at this — there are twenty Southern Representatives who represent nothing but property in man, and yet their vote counts as much in Congress as the twenty Northerners who stand for the will of 1,800,000 freemen. Slavery gives the South the same advantage in the choice of President; consequently the slaveholding South has long controlled the Federal Power of the nation.

Look at the recent acts of the Slave Power! The Fugitive Slave bill, the Kansas-Nebraska bill, the Dred Scott decision, the fillibustering against Cuba (till found

too strong), and now against Mexico and other feeble neighbors, and, to crown all, the actual reöpening of the African slave-trade!

The South has kidnapped men in Boston, and made the Judges of Massachusetts go under her symbolic chain to enter the courts of justice (!) She has burned houses and butchered innocent men in Kansas, and the perpetrators of that wickedness were rewarded by the Federal Government with high office and great pay! Those things are notorious; they have stirred up some little indignation at the North, and freemen begin to think of defending their liberty. Hence came the Free-Soil party, and hence the Republican party — it contemplates no direct benefit to the slave, only the defence of the white man in his national rights, or his conventional privileges. It will grow stronger every year, and also bolder. It must lay down principles as a platform to work its measures on; the principles will be found to require much more than what was at first proposed, and even from this platform Republicans will promptly see that *they cannot defend the natural rights of freemen without destroying that Slavery which takes away the natural rights of a negro.* So, first, the wise and just men of the party will sympathize with such as seek to liberate the slaves, either peacefully or by violence; next, they will declare their opinions in public; and, finally, the whole body of the party will come to the same sympathy and the same opinion. Then, of course, they will encourage men like Capt. Brown, give him money and all manner of help, and also encourage the slaves whenever they shall rise to take their liberty, at all hazards. When called to help put down an insurrection of the slaves, they will go readily enough and do the work by removing the cause of insurrection — that is — *by destroying Slavery itself.*

An Anti-Slavery party, under one name or another, will before long control the Federal Government, and will exercise its Constitutional Rights, and perform its Constitutional Duty, and "guarantee a Republican form of government to every State in the Union." That is a work of time and peaceful legislation. But the short work of violence will be often tried, and each attempt will gain something for the cause of Humanity, even by its dreadful process of blood.

IV. But there is yet another agency that will act against Slavery. There are many mischievous persons who are ready for any wicked work of violence. They abound in the city of New York, (a sort of sink where the villany of both hemispheres settles down, and genders that moral pestilence which steams up along the columns of the *New York Herald* and the *New York Observer*, the great escape-pipes of secular and ecclesiastical wickedness) they commit the great crimes of violence and robbery at home, plunder emigrants, and engage in the slave-trade, or venture on fillibustering expeditions. This class of persons is common in all the South. One of the legitimate products of her "peculiar institution," they are familiar with violence, ready and able for murder. Public opinion sustains such men. Bully Brooks was but one of their representatives in Congress. Now-a-days they are fond of Slavery, defend it, and seek to spread it. But the time must come one day — it may come any time — when the lovers of mischief will do a little fillibustering at home, and rouse up the slaves to rob, burn and kill. Prudent carpenters sweep up all the shavings in their shops at night, and remove this food of conflagration to a safe place, lest the spark of a candle, the end of a cigar, or a friction-match should swiftly end their wealth, slowly

gathered together. The South takes pains to strew her carpenter's shop with shavings, and fill it full thereof. She encourages men to walk abroad with naked candles in their hands and lighted cigars in their mouths; then they scatter friction-matches on the floor, and dance a fillibustering jig thereon. She cries, "Well done! Hurrah for Walker!" "Hurrah for Brooks!" "Hurrah for the bark Wanderer and its cargo of slaves! Up with the bowie-knife! Down with justice and humanity!" The South must reap as she sows; where she scatters the wind, the whirlwind will come up. It will be a pretty crop for her to reap. Within a few years the South has BURNED ALIVE eight or ten negroes. Other black men looked on, and learned how to fasten the chain, how to pile the green wood, how to set this Hell-fire of Slavery agoing. The apprentice may be slow to learn, but he has had teaching enough by this time to know the art and mystery of torture; and, depend upon it, the negro will one day apply it to his old tormentors. The Fire of Vengeance may be waked up even in an African's heart, especially when it is fanned by the wickedness of a white man: then it runs from man to man, from town to town. What shall put it out? *The white man's blood!*

Now, Slavery is a wickedness so vast and so old, so rich and so respectable, supported by the State, the Press, the Market, and the Church, that all those agencies are needed to oppose it with — those, and many more which I cannot speak of now. You and I prefer the peaceful method; but I, at least, shall welcome the violent if no other accomplish the end. So will the great mass of thoughtful and good men at the North; else why do we honor the Heroes of the Revolution, and build them monuments all over our blessed New-England? I think you gave money for

that of Bunker Hill: I once thought it a folly; now I recognize it as a great sermon in stone, which is worth not only all the money it cost to build it, but all the blood it took to lay its corner-stones. Trust me, its lesson will not be in vain — at the North, I mean, for the Logic of Slavery will keep the South on its lower course, and drive it on more swiftly than before. "Capt. Brown's expedition was a failure," I hear it said. I am not quite sure of that. True, it kills fifteen men by sword and shot, and four or five men by the gallows. But it shows the weakness of the greatest Slave State in America, the worthlessness of her soldiery, and the utter fear which Slavery genders in the bosoms of the masters. Think of the condition of the City of Washington while Brown was at work!

Brown will die, I think, like a martyr, and also like a saint. His noble demeanor, his unflinching bravery, his gentleness, his calm, religious trust in God, and his words of truth and soberness, cannot fail to make a profound impression on the hearts of Northern men; yes, and on Southern men. For "every human heart is human," &c. I do not think the money wasted, nor the lives thrown away. Many acorns must be sown to have one come up; even then, the plant grows slow; but it is an Oak at last. None of the Christian martyrs died in vain; and from Stephen, who was stoned at Jerusalem, to Mary Dyer, whom our fathers hanged on a bough of "the great tree" on Boston Common, I think there have been few spirits more pure and devoted than John Brown's, and none that gave up their breath in a nobler cause. Let the American State hang his body, and the American Church damn his soul; still, the blessing of such as are ready to perish will fall on him, and the universal justice of the Infinitely

Perfect God will take him welcome home. The road to heaven is as short from the gallows as from a throne; perhaps, also, as easy.

I suppose you would like to know something about myself. Rome has treated me to bad weather, which tells its story in my health, and certainly does not mend me. But I look for brighter days and happier nights. The sad tidings from America — my friends in peril, in exile, in jail, killed, or to be hung — have filled me with grief, and so I fall back a little, but hope to get forward again. God bless you and yours, and comfort you!

Ever affectionately yours,

THEODORE PARKER.